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**Citation for published version:**

Cairns, JW 2016, *Women's Violence Against Men in 19th-Century North America*..  
<<http://www.elhblog.law.ed.ac.uk/2016/09/28/womens-violence-against-men-in-19th-century-north-america/>>

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Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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## Women’s Violence Against Men in 19th-Century North America

Posted on [28/09/2016](#) by [John Cairns](#)

Earlier this year, L.S.U. Press published *Marital Cruelty in Antebellum America* by Robin C. Sager. The blurb for what is obviously an important and interesting book states: “Sager’s findings also challenge historical literature’s assumptions about the regional influences on violence, showing that married southerners were no more or less violent than their midwestern counterparts. Her work reveals how definitions and perceptions of cruelty varied according to the gender of victim and perpetrator. Correcting historical mischaracterizations of women’s violence as trivial, rare, or defensive, Sager finds antebellum wives both capable and willing to commit a wide variety of cruelties within their marriages.”

While not attempting to minimise the horror or significance of marital violence, it reminded your blogger of a pencil drawing inside his copy of Kent’s *Commentaries on American Law*, the eighth edition of 1854, a copy that had spent much of its life in the USA, being sold at one stage by Dixon, a law publisher and bookseller on Walnut Street, Philadelphia. On page 104 of volume II, Kent writes: “but the English ecclesiastical law makes no such distinction, and divorces are granted, on a bill by the husband, for cruel usage by the wife”. Kent provides a footnote to a case in Haggard’s Consistorial Reports. A 19th-century reader has added another footnote by an asterisk, the footnote consisting of a pencil drawing of a woman brandishing a typically North American broom, at a cowering man. Though in modern eyes, an image that essentially mocks women or “hen-pecked” husbands in a way we find uncomfortable, it is revealing about the social attitudes of the day.

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